A Look Back in Doubt

"Confessions of a Heretic": Multicultural Literature in Australia

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Abstract. It is argued that the emergence of 'multiculturalism' in Australia during the Nineteen-eighties was almost entirely determined by political considerations. An application of the concept to literary culture was not anticipated. Nor was there a discourse of migrant or ethnic literature before post-war immigration.

As part of the Australia Council's decision to sponsor a literary culture of 'New Australians' it encouraged the creation of a journal for multicultural literature, *Outrider*. This article is an attempt to characterise a group of perceived ‚multicultural writers' by raising doubt about their real or assumed status. It is true they employ highly individual creative imagination and variations of literary style by questioning the nature of migration (often without being migrants themselves). However, such writing is hardly unique to inherent characteristics of ‚multicultural aesthetics'. Formally and thematically these authors' language frequently employs a wide range of elective affinities, alienation techniques or correlative analogies. They can hardly be considered ‚minority writers' of limited literary genius. In truth they are creators of sophisticated poetry and prose by overcoming (or 'integrating') foreign language restriction. To them migration is not merely a subject or theme: it is a consciousness manifesting itself in literary form and style. The best 'migrant writing' invokes dimensions of alienation shared by a readership whose cultural dislocation is not confined to refugees, asylum-seekers or social outcasts. In the contemporary global end game, migration has become a shared state of mind.

A brilliant and complex linguistic approach to 'multicultural writing' has been argued by Australian sociolinguist Paul Carter. He rejects the negative view of immigration as a form of displacement. Applying his well-balanced analysis of "migrant aesthetic" dialogue promises not only "a new kind of history". In the end it means refining a new, distinctively migrant poetics.

Key Words: Ethnic literature; Migration; Multiculturalism; Paul Carter; Post-colonial collage; Migrant Aesthetic; Mainstream literary culture

Introduction

Recent Australian literary criticism has made much of the terms „multicultural", "ethnic" or "indigenous": the overall concept resulted in what was unhesitatingly called multi-cultural writing. Much dubious speculation was prompted by the vagueness and general application of socio-political terminology to literary aesthetics. The designation "multicultural" was originally designed by politicians with the aim of attracting electoral votes of migrant, minority or inter-racial background. Nations of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees were keen to project new democratic practices like positive discrimination, tolerance and equality, an ambivalent yet compatible co-existence. None of these qualities had much to do with literary aspirations.

Allow me to combine a personal review of Australia's sudden and dramatic commitment to "multiculturalism" with a short account of its earliest writers such designated. When I arrived in Australia in 1960 the country was overwhelmingly committed to a "White Australia Policy". To protect Australian workers, governments and trade unions were unapologetically racist, both in dealing with post-war overseas immigrants and Indigenous inhabitants who lived in their tribal nations for millennia. Integrating the thoughts and ideas of Australia's native culture would have been the last thing on white Australians' mind. It was no more recognised than the First Nation's people themselves. Until 1967 they were not even included in the official census.

In 1992, two decades after the emergence of multiculturalism, I published an article under the title "Multicultural aesthetics: A preliminary definition". In it, I stated at the onset that "reviews of a multicultural literature in Australia continue to suffer from a lack of terminological consensus, indeed from an applicable use of aesthetic concepts of any kind". Understandably, social politics dominated, leaving a vacuum of critical vocabulary specifically to analyse the *art* of what was sometimes referred to as 'ethnic writing'. Rather optimistically, I closed my discussion with the comment: "Perhaps the time has come to attempt a few preliminary definitions of the nature and function of a multicultural imagination, if only to allow further literary discussion of a migrant aesthetic." (29)

In hindsight I was embarrassed by the boldness of that suggestion, until I came across a major study by the Australian sociolinguist Paul Carter the very same year. His analysis *Living in a New Country. History, Travelling and Language* did provide a first "migrant aesthetic" which he described as a "Post-Colonial Collage" (186). I will come back to it later.

As I said, on my arrival in Melbourne there was no concept of a 'multicultural' Australian literature. Let me attempt a somewhat heretical look-back at the emergence of this new idea. I can only offer biased aspects of a movement in which I had a part. We were aiming to convince Australian readers of a literary development that subsequently came to be known as 'multicultural writing'. The truth was that we ourselves were not quite sure if that was the right description. Weren't all writers 'multicultural'? In the absence of a coherent "migrant aesthetic" the best we could do was acknowledge the emergence of a different group of authors. New voices demanded to be heard. Hardly any derived from the multilingual ethnic press. The sudden increase seemed to have been prompted by submissions from educated Europeans with a broader interest in multinational cultures.

Let me repeat: the concept of multiculturalism in the realm of literature never acquired the status of a dogmatic article of faith. As writers, we were still learning to understand ourselves.

It took two decades before Phoenix Publications was founded as a press designed for mostly migrant authors of diverse cultural background. Among the first writers it published were Serge Liberman, Lolo Houbein, Walter Adamson, Antigone Kefalá, Dimitris Tsaloumas, David Malouf, Maria Lewitt, Banumbir Wongar, Jack Hibberd, Margaret Diesendorf, Alex Skovron and Peter Skrzynecki. Its first anthology bore the programmatic title *Ethnic Australia.* (1981) It featured the work of two dozen at that time virtually unknown writers. Phoenix was lucky to receive overwhelmingly positive responses. In Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* Sybil Nolan followed Thomas Shapcott's description of the collection: She too found it "as ethnic as an Anzac biscuit" (September 26, 1981). We were uneasy about the compliment, yet grateful for the well-meaning if ambivalent recognition.

From 1984 to 1995 I acted as founding editor of *Outrider*, a journal of multicultural literature that identified itself as "Contemporary Australian Writing". Its modest, almost apologetic editorial policy was "to extend the concept of Australian literature" (*OR*, Vol.4/No 1, 3). From the beginning there was strong reluctance to operate with ideological interpretations of terms such as 'multicultural'. Our stated ambition was the hope to integrate writings by migrants into the 'mainstream' of Australian literature. Throughout the life of *Outrider* its editorial statements avoided narrow or dogmatic definitions. It acknowledged interrelations without equating them. Once I was asked what I thought the Australia Council Literature Board was supporting in *Outrider*. I thought my answer was valid and truthful: "Good writing", even while we were still trying to define the quality of excellence and where we were going. I have not changed my mind.

However, it is also true that in some circles of social politics the word multicultural began to take on negative connotations of its own. Australia was experiencing mass migration at unprecedented levels. In that context politicians were looking for ready-made slogans to propagate social harmony. Government and Opposition gradually developed increasingly different attitudes to migration, ethnicity, social services, Aboriginal culture – and Australian literature. During national elections the slogan 'multicultural' exercised a strong influence of divisiveness.

Outrider-91-Almanach *Earth Wings* gave an introductory account of the journal. It began with the Literature Board of the Australia Council sponsoring a policy of encouraging writers of so-called ethnic background. (It seemed to have escaped the Board, and many of us, that all Australians were of local or overseas "ethnic background".) Back in the eighties, the Council still boasted an official "Multicultural Officer" on its staff. In a very real sense *Outrider* owed its existence to a conscious government decision by the Literature Board. Originally it grew out of two "Multicultural Writers' Weekends" hosted by the Council in Sydney on 13 and 14 October 1984 and in Melbourne on 27 and 28 October 1984. Throughout the following decade the journal continued to attract its share of funding from the Board. Without official government support and subsidy, 'multicultural literature' in Australia would not have got off the ground.

Nonetheless, with a gradual shift away from the politics of multiculturalism – the term itself began to be replaced by 'cultural diversity' – the previously strong support of Board and Council began to wane. A backlash against multicultural literature had begun. It was not unexpected. From the beginning Serge Liberman and I simply understood the term as an extension of the concept Australian literature. It was to draw attention to the major contribution 'migrant writers' were beginning to make to Australian letters. At the same time, it aimed to contextualise Australian literature in broader perspectives of world literature. Translations and essays on 'foreign' literatures served to support cultural affinities. Of the four hundred authors published in *Outrider* over the first eight years, approximately half were born outside Australia. In fact, the journal never was a ghetto journal of migrant writing (unless one wanted to classify all Australians as immigrants).

As such, its content and format have been faithful reflections of the state of ostensible 'multiculturalism' in Australian writing at that time. 'Migrant authors' published in *Outrider* considered themselves overwhelmingly as Australian writers. It displayed a greater willingness to publish artists of different cultural background – indeed, that was its very brief. 'Multicultural writing', then, never stood for separate development, a kind of literary apartheid. The broader editorial policy of *Outrider* meant that Australian literature was searching internationally for a new imaginative creativity. It developed a programmatic opening to global 'source cultures'. Alex Miller's novel *The Ancestor Game* (2000) proved a powerful demonstration the new quality of Australian-Chinese 'inter-cultural' writing. It was not merely a matter of retaining cultural ties with one's 'mother' country – a characteristic Colonial Anglo-Celtic phenomenon – but related Australia's own developing literary imagination to the rest of world culture. As a true reflection of the nation's social structure *Outrider* aimed to propagate a multilingual, multi-literary culture. In 1988 Penguin published a bicentennial double edition under the heading *Australian Writing 1988* (with Robert Adamson and Manfred Jurgensen as co-editors). 1990 saw the release of *Outrider. A Year of Australian Literature.* 1993 an edition of over 400 pages announced itself as *Outrider. The First Decade. Words and All.* It featured a Libretto by David Malouf. The 470-page edition of 1994 bore the title *Riding Out: Contemporary Writing*, with an inside-subtitle *New Writing from Around the World.* Titles and concepts reflect the enlarged national/international development from an "ethnic journal" to a global dialogue of multicultural literature. Under the heading of "Literary Multiculturalism, Australian and World Literature" the extended editorial policy would "feature theme-related writing from all over the world, with a heavy bias towards Australian authors" (ix).

Yet it became apparent over the first twenty years that the Anglo influence re-emerged, even in *Outrider*. The politics of multiculturalism no longer supported those 'ethnic' writers who depended on the government's positive discrimination. A dialogue of constant questioning of cultural assumptions had been terminated. It became clear 'literary multiculturalism' could never be an exercise in social tolerance. Rather, it aimed to be a creative world-wide confluence of imagination, made up of tributaries constituting fertile deltas of global and national cultures. However, in the end it seemed the 'mainstream' no longer remembered its mouth. The Introduction to Outrider's *Earth*

Wings (1991) warned: "It may well be that a dialogue of constant questioning of our cultural assumptions has been terminated." (x)

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On the day of Australia's first 'Multicultural Writer's Weekend' I introduced myself to Maria Lewitt, a Polish-born writer who had just published two autobiographical novels, *Come Spring* at St. Martin's Press in New York and *No Snow in December* at William Heinemann in Melbourne. She had not come to listen to political or academic nonsense. I remember her one comment. It was short and sweet: "There's only good or bad writing." She was right of course, at least on one level. It reminded us to concentrate above all on the quality of 'migrant writing' (whatever that was). It did not take us long to realise it was indeed going to be a major issue.

I tried to keep an open mind. My starting point was: a definition of culture is that culture is definition. So I posed the question: Who, then, defines what culture we are, and raised the most important challenge: Do Australian migrant writers possess the freedom to be their own author? In socio-political terms the answer was: Yes. Australia was a democracy guaranteeing freedom of speech. Our government aimed for true representation of all its citizens. Outside politics, however, for authors of a creative imagination literacy was a fundamental presumption. No bureaucracy could empower a writer lacking artistic originality and literary knowledge. It would be interesting to see if recent arrivals still struggling to learn the new language would follow migrant literature. Evidence showed they did not. *Outrider* attracted relatively few migrant subscribers. It was not suitable material for language learners. (Ethnic newspapers and radio broadcasts were of course published in most migrants' native languages.)

Could the introduction of 'multiculturalism' merely be a matter of terminology, consensus and description? Let's be clear about conflicts relating to Australia's own historical identity. The Europeanised country was itself a migrant culture, continuing the culture of a "motherland" that had little in common with the reality of the Fifth Continent. The title of Maria Lewitt's novel was again short and to the point: "No Snow in December". The old language's inaptitude to express a vastly different reality soon became apparent. Political, social and cultural structures were retained under Colonial and post-Colonial conditions. White Australia was „Europeanised". Early paintings reinvoked or imitated well-known European art movements. Similarly, the beginnings of Australian literature proved simulations of 18th and 19th century English writing. Creations in the arts lacked authenticity in reproducing nature, landscapes and wildlife. It took some time to acquire skills of a realistic stock-taking in the familiar mother tongue. Not surprisingly, the "New Australians" (as they subsequently all became) had difficulty accepting 'foreign' migrant cultures into their outdated or re-established home version of Australia. Migrants representing different ethnic origins were pressurised to 'assimilate'. Australia was interested in migrant workers, not in sensibilities and mores of ethnic backgrounds. In mainstream Australian literature transported British low-brow culture formed, shaped and defined immigrants "for the term of their natural life".

Until very recently, women, Indigenous Australians and migrants shared the suppression of not being allowed the freedom to define themselves, or to be their own author. Yet imagination constitutes a migratory trait in human sensibility. It both defines identity and transforms it. Man's imagination is by its very nature social: it projects and rehearses modes of existence. Role playing is a natural feature of human speech. Distribution of social power creates a mainstream culture. In relation to their own imagination societies may for political reasons choose *to enforce* minorities and marginalities.

The genesis of terms such as 'migrant', 'ethnic' or 'multicultural' reveals the politics of cultural discrimination, the casting and evaluating of social roles. In contemporary Australia all citizens are considered migrants, ethnics or 'multicultural'. Yet it reinforces the question of who owns the power of cultural definition, who is in control of determining traditional or new social identities. Who owns the discussion? In the aim to authenticate their family history some modern Australians are now ironically proud of their 'shameful convict heritage'. In writing, the politics of creating and dispensing 'multiculturalism' proved rather less risqué. Quality of writing is the one overriding factor for verbal art. Recently many works by Indigenous authors have joined the Anglo-literary mainstream. (Reflecting the nature of the art, painters, sculptors and composers are forced less frequently into a collective 'multicultural' identity.)

Depending on the many historical influences and variable writing impulses, it could be argued that artists of high imaginative creativity are by definition 'multi-cultural'. Experience of migration, on the other hand, does not by itself create a literary imagination. In fact, it seems inherently absurd to plead for a writing culture of authors whose language skills are handicapped by the very circumstance of their restriction. Authors have to find a way of writing about migration without specific verbal or stylistic limitations forced upon them. (In a literary workshop for migrant writers I conducted, it emerged that writing about the experience of migration in their native tongue proved for many equally challenging.) In his novel *The Tree of Man* Patrick White wrote about life's migration within Australia's own culture. The great recurring human subjects can be presented in imaginatively variable ways of multiple meanings, allusions and settings. It is not necessary for an author who wants to write about migration to treat his subject under such thematic heading. A writer can choose a love story, a family novel, a Bildungsroman, a phantasy, a biography and dozens of other literary forms dealing with unsettling trauma, restlessness of uprooting, displacement, homelessness, seeking refuge, migratory upheavals or the restlessness of life in Australia as experienced by the quintessential Australian Stan, the hero of White's ground-breaking novel. Here is one of the rarer attempts to invoke the daily hardships and adjustments of migration being confined in prison-like conditions:

> bonegilla 1961
>
> the heat of burnt grass,
>
> impotent anger
>
> at an English class,
>
> men getting younger

by each disciplined day

till they are schoolboys

again, told to pay

attention, roll-calls

into another

life, how to translate

the humid weather,

the shame and the hate.

at night the huts throb

in desperate love-

making, young men sob

in darkness, dreams of

childhood call them home.

twilight rains set in.

morning builds its dome.

the snake sheds its skin.

(Manfred Jurgensen)

Only the poem's title reveals its setting and occasion, capturing typical challenges of life in the historical NSW migrant camp Bonegilla.

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Among a short list of representative so-called 'multicultural' Australian writers let me try to categorise examples of imagination triumphing over academic, critical, socio-political, purely linguistic or bureaucratic considerations. One author writes about absence and isolation, thus practising the art of migrating without leaving home. Another invokes longing and belonging to express frustrations and alienation. Migration, like alienation, is a state of mind. The formula remains the same: Strength of imagination leads to good writing that effortlessly escapes descriptions or concepts such as 'ethnic' or 'multicultural'. With one line "For what we are can only be imagined" the poet James McAuley summed up more than any discussion about mainstream or multiculturalism in Australian literature. The poem celebrates the full potential of human consciousness in verbal arts.

When I think of the following Australian writers still classified by too many as 'multicultural', I am struck by only one overwhelming feature they have in common: They are all so very different.

During the mid to late eighties *Walter Adamson* (1911 - 2010) seemed the most recognisable 'multicultural writer' in Australia. A German author born three years before the First World War, Adamson emigrated in 1939. After teaching English as second language in La Paz, Bolivia, he returned to Australia in 1953 and became a full-time writer in 1969. Adamson is best-known for *The Institution*, a novel first written and published in German. Its English translation by Sonja Delander appeared in 1976. In 1986 Penguin in England and Viking-Penguin in New York released parallel new editions. Neither author nor translator seemed certain how much of Adamson's writing was a reflection of personal experience. In some of his short stories, most of all in the collection *Australia of all Places* (*Ausgerechnet Australien*), he wrote about migration. Yet he refused to acknowledge it as a subject of special interest. Meanwhile it could be argued that the recent flood of refugees and asylum seekers throughout the world strongly reinforced the topicality of migration and homelessness. In 1985 Adamson published a collection of illustrated verse, *Adamson's Three-Legged World.* In one of Adamson's poems, ‚The Immigrant', the first words are: "To this, my land, I've come too late". (7). The immigrant's shelter or home is neither defined nor described. Both remain a state of mind. All the opening lines reveal is that the poet did not find it until late in life. No adopted country is mentioned. We do not know why the migrant feels he has found his land "too late". Adamson's delightful collection of nonsense verse, *Adamson's Three-Legged World*, demonstrates the overriding characteristic style of all his writing: comedy, warmth, wit and humour.

The Institution (*Die Anstalt*) has remained by far Adamson's most significant work. It is tempting to interpret it as an imaginative critique of 'ethnic literature' in Australia. The novel's plot consists of non-native artists performing soundless compositions. Their "little chamber music" (53) without instruments is a fictional realisation of what many writers, critics and politicians meant by Australian multicultural literature in the 'eighties. The irony is that the projection of Adamson's Swiftian model carried literary, social and cultural values that overtook contemporary Australian developments. The "shock epidemic"(53) of such "experiment" outside mainstream culture had the effect of double alienation. Nonetheless the work demonstrated a similar effect outside Australia as well. The author's imaginative social exclusion created a model not unlike Albert Camus' Outsider. *The Institution* was not specifically about migration, but inescapably included such reflection. Adamson's grotesque distortion of social norm projects an intrinsic challenge of Absurdist perversion.

For all that, "the Institution" was not merely written as a polemic against a perceived ownership of literary culture. The novel's central theme deals with the fundamental uncertainty of who we are. The absurdity of language's inability to do justice to the complex and contradictory nature of individual existence is highlighted by various establishment characters proclaiming their identity in their very names. Adamson's humour thus expresses a serious philosophical, socio-political and existential concern. His witty social criticism includes philosophical consciousness, a mixture curiously

appropriate for a self-deprecating Australian writer. In the 'real' world, the reader is told, "everyone practised the playing of non-existent instruments". (78) A key to Adamson's own thoughts reads: "It was in the irrational that life's reason made itself most felt." (193) Such insight goes beyond mere irony. It is mindful of historical crimes against humanity and warns of repeating mistakes of the past. At one stage the narrator explains: "When something is senseless, it can't become more so. No, it has to happen. You know, when I was young it did not have to happen. But nobody did what was necessary, although there were plenty to warn us. 'Doom merchants', they were called." (75)

Clearly, this is an important book deserving a wide reading public. Its very conception and style it is unmistakeably European, its humour the voice of historical experience, its artistic form a rejection of traditional aesthetic and moral realism. Adamson's *Institution* is a Beckettian 'End Game' played with clownish acrobatics of a desperate knowledge. As such, it offered Australian literature a new dimension, an Absurdist direction informed by Kafka and Wittgenstein. The unique tone of the novel derives from its intellectuality and the sustained witticisms of an imaginative tour de force.

In Adamson's humour logic is seen as a sinister game of synonyms, disguising the violence of Reason. Insanity emerges as the only escape from falsified 'sense'. Language itself is the 'Institution' inviting manipulation of truth and distortion of reality. The authorial narrator of *The Institution* knows what he is saying when, in an act of collusive recognition, he identifies himself with his readers as "we outsiders". (135) As with the direction of the Institution, it is said of the writer he too "had, from being the puppeteer, become a puppet". (137) It is in such manner that the indirect treatment of migration and so-called multiculturalism acquire a deeper and more unsettling meaning than the abstract manipulative arguments of sociologists and politicians. Adamson is not limiting himself to writing about ethnicity, migration or other forms of alienation. His imagination embraces an inclusive code of multiple applications. This 'migrant author' has no need for a special 'multicultural' language and perspective. Most important of all, his highly entertaining prose is eminently accessible to 'mainstream' readers. With Walter Adamson there is no conflict between mainstream and minority writing. He turns minority into majority concern. His coded imagination combines an extensive complexity with deceptive simplicity.

The late *Dimitris Tsaloumas* (1921 - 2016), a poet both of international standing in both English and Greek, was born on Leros (Greece), lived and taught English at Melbourne high schools before returning to his home country where he died in his nineties. Tsaloumas categorically disclaimed the description 'ethnic writer' with its implication of a cultural ghetto, preferring to describe himself as an Australian Greek writer. His works were published in either Greek or English collections. He made no attempt at a unifying oneness. For many Greek migrants both his English and Greek volumes seemed too sophisticated; Anglo-Celtic readers, most of whom were unable to read Greek, confined themselves to his Australian poetry. Unsurprisingly, Tsaloumas did not attract 'a multicultural' reading public. Outside Australia, especially in his native Greece, his poetry is highly regarded.

David Malouf (1934 -) is a second generation Australian-born novelist of Lebanese background, who lived both in Australia and in Europe. He is arguably Australia's greatest contemporary prose writer. His works are published in over twenty languages. In a context of world literature too Malouf undoubtedly ranks as one of the most outstanding of contemporary novelists.

Despite his second-generation 'ethnic background' Malouf's genius towers above any attempt to claim him as a 'multicultural author'. Migrant backgrounds have invited a characterisation of more than one culture, a sensibility of at least partial 'otherness'. Yet the temptation to classify the nature of such imagination as if it were an exception to an assumed norm of 'monocultural' creativity is nonsense. Any such terminological categorising violates the inventive creativity of great literary artists. In fact, there are few, if any, truly 'mono-' or 'multicultural' writers. Creative imagination does not follow rules of academic prescription. David Malouf describes the process perfectly: "…you have to find some real spiritual link between us and the landscape, us and the cities, us and the lives we live *here*… you have to give people – in books – something like a mythology… you have to *make* it for them – it's not ready-made – it has to be *imagined*." (75) The new country does not require a knowledge of assimilation. It is imagination that *creates* the land and its people. There is little Lebanese culture to be found in Malouf's prose. Nor does his writing capture the 'nature' of life on this continent, except through the author's creative sensibility, a uniquely personal quality. Malouf explains: "I think this 'Australian-ness' is what we're all trying to work out. When I look at the body of my writing, I want to say to myself: 'This is one person's attempt to give an account of what being Australian is – this particular Australian.'" (75) In a novel such as *Fly Away Peter* Malouf creates his mythological Australia in the context of Europe's 'Great War'.

It is significant how little Malouf reveals in various interviews about his Lebanese family background. He frequently replies to specific questions with evasive answers such as "I don't understand", "I don't know", "I have no idea", "No idea at all". (89-93) At one point the interviewer, Samar Attar, prompts: "I got all that from your fiction." (93) Malouf does not agree. He declares unmistakeably: "I am a person who's had a complete Anglo-Saxon education in Australia. I am an Australian writer" and he adds more generally: "…almost all ethnic writing is marginal writing." Despite such statements by David Malouf the interviewer retorts: "But I believe that all you write about is your ethnic experience." (98) Malouf replies to the question of autobiographical elements in his novels in an almost non-chalant manner: "They are just games you play, determined by fiction." (103) He makes an important point when he argues: "History is not what happened but what is told." He categorically rejects the interviewer's assertion he was part of "a migrant family". (105) He also reminds his readers that he has had no contact with the Lebanese community since he left Brisbane in 1948. Perhaps the most revealing fact is that Malouf has what he calls "a slight revulsion against all things Central European", but his feeling at home in "the Mediterranean world of Egypt, Morocco, Greece or Italy and most comfortable" (106), a "whole world" for him quite different from Central and Northern Europe. Malouf lived of course in Italy and wrote 'classical' novels like *Ransom*, *Remembering Babylon* and *An Imaginary Life*.

For those and other reasons I would argue strongly against any meaningful characterisation of David Malouf's writing as 'multicultural'. Unrelated to ethnicity or migration, his prose creates a reality of the highest poetic quality inherent in the language itself. Discussing Malouf's conflict between Australia and Europe, Philip Neilsen rightly concentrates on the author's habit of mythologising the idea of a place. He points out that in *An Imaginary Life* the antipodean myth is 'reversed': instead of exile and defeat, the antipodes are regenerative "a valuable place in their own right" (177). It is above all the Ovidian claim that places do not 'exist' but are created. For Malouf that means Australia is "Europe translated and changed" (265). It is through mythologising the country that it takes possession of its own culture. Instead of borrowings from multicultural influences, Malouf's writing allows Australia to be imaginatively and culturally "possessed" by its readers.

The distinguished novelist *Alex Miller* (1936 -) was born in London and emigrated to Australia at the age of seventeen. An Anglo-Saxon writer deciding to settle in Australia seems comparable to ex-patriate authors who moved the opposite direction, from Australia to London like Robert Hughes, Clive James, Barry Humphries, Germaine Greer and other artists. Miller fictionalises his impressions of Australia without acquiring a recognisable 'Australian' style. Undoubtedly, his writing is based on experience, yet I have been unable to discover a transformative style, form or preoccupation. I see a gifted author living and writing in Australia. His main themes are invocations of inner lives, the psychology of love, creating and experiencing visions of elective cultures.

Although Miller could hardly be called a multicultural author as the term was applied by some, one of his finest novels, *The Ancestor Game*, deals with "a restless sense of cultural displacement" (110 -144), specifically with an ambivalent relationship with the culture of European Australia. A loving involvement with Chinese civilisation leads his characters to a complex and paradoxical realisation: that to be at home in exile may be the Australian condition of belonging and estrangement at the heart of all European cultures. None of Miller's migrants leave Australia, nor do they return to their ancestral dreams. The European cultural concept of exile reflects a belonging comparable to the Mandarin meaning of Lang Tzu, the name of Miller's Chinese protagonist, who remains an Australian migrant: "two characters which signify the son who goes away" (blurb). Miller narrates different cultural traditions to arrive at an elective relationship gained from imaginative or fictional integration. Ancestry stories from Shanghai are superimposed on the suburban Melbourne setting of Richmond. An extreme example of what could be termed fictional integration of cultures is described as follows: "I had also learned from my tutor, a minor Prussian nobleman who was a fierce defender of something which he called *the irrepressible genius of the Germanic soul*, that while the French venerated Claude alongside Poussin as one of the very best of their artists, in reality, *historically* so to speak according to my tutor, Claude had actually been a German who had imagined into being the ideal landscape for the German soul to take up its residence in." (270) This preposterous account is commented on by the narrator in a manner similar to the author's own experience of fictional integration: "The Prussian's arguments did not convince me that Claude was a German but rather that he had not belonged anywhere in particular." (271) It is Alex Miller who puts words into the mouth of his fictional character August

Spiess, when he is asked why he never returned to his native Germany: "Never before this have I replied with the truth. I have never confessed to anyone until this moment, in which I freely confess it to you, that for more than twenty years the International Settlement has been for me the Claudean landscape of my youthful dreams." (272)

Antigone Kefalá (1935 -) is a Romanian-born poet and prose writer of Greek origin who lived in Greece, New Zealand and Australia. Her overriding literary themes are absence, migration and non-belonging. Asked whether there is such a thing as an ethnic literature distinct from the main-stream of Australian writing, her answer remains undecided and open: "Yes and no". She speaks of "unblocking issues" between "ethnic and mainstream literature" yet argues that "we do at times express things which could not be expressed by a person who has been born here and belongs to the country from five generations back" (13). As a writer she defines herself quite generally as someone looking for her chosen material and remain "true to her own type of language" (14).

In fact, Kefalá contradicts her "unblocking argument" by rejecting claims of a migrant writer's "special vision". It is the strength of imagination, not the effect of ethnic belonging that determines how and what can be expressed. At the centre of her poetic writing stands the "individual experience". Expressing it, becomes for the writer almost entirely "a stylistic issue". She repeatedly describes her own style as reflecting "views of a poet". Allowing for a generically low sale of poetry, Kefalá's work has been well received by Australia's mainstream readership. Clearly, her readers do not experience a "block" between the poet's ethnicity and other lyrical writing. Confidently she advises migrant authors of a shared challenge for poets and writers of any origin: "to educate the market to their own form". (14)

Yet contradictions continue. Kefalá asserts: "I would never dare to write about purely Australian issues" (16). (What are "purely Australian issues"?) Modestly she contends future migrant writing may in time "be an enrichment, another point of view" (17). That's as far as she is prepared to identify herself with 'ethnic writing'. Her plan "to write about Australia from now on" (18) is, as I say, in conflict with her earlier assertion. Most likely she means "Australia" consists of more than "purely Australian issues". Kefalá's voice is that of the paradigmatic "Alien" in any context, a precarious subjectivity "lifted free of contextualising mutabilities" (21), as Sneja Gunew puts it so academically. The following lines invoke isolation and alienation not as a specific migrant situation: "I am tired, living at home among strangers, / sitting at the same tables, / waiting for an acceptance that never comes / an understanding that would not be born, / the measure in us already spent." ('Family life', *The Alien,* 8) It would be a gross misunderstanding to judge such thought merely a reflection of migrant separation. The poem's range speaks for itself.

Serge Liberman (1942 - 2017) was the son of Polish Jewish refugees, born in Russia during the flight from Nazi-Germany's invasion. In 1951 he settled in Melbourne where he combined a medical practice with writing and editorial activities. A prolific contributor to Australian Judaica, he wrote a prose reminiscent of nineteenth century European style. In 1984 Liberman became a corresponding editor of *Outrider.*

During his lifetime he regularly addressed issues of multicultural and mainstream Australian literature in numerous articles, letters and discussions. In 1984 he was featured

on an ABC Saturday Guest Programme under the heading of *The Place of Ethnic Minority Writing in the Mainstream of Australian Literature*. Ironically, he defines his concern for the relationship of ethnic writing to the Australian literary mainstream with a confession: "I am not wholly sure what the true mainstream is." (83) He is not troubled by his uncertainty. For Liberman "the question is one of definition and not of substance" (84). He is strangely accepting of historical practice and terminology. All he asks for is that "ethnic writing" not be set distinctly apart from general Australian literature. He modestly sees it as a tributary to the mainstream. His objection relates to an "elevation of abstractions", to him "among the worst and waste-engendering of intellectual sins" (85). Bravely he insists that "success may be won outside the indigenous literary establishment as well as within it", for after all ethnic writing merely seeks "to add another dimension to Australian culture" (86).

Outrider published his Open Letter to Dr. Judith Brett, editor of the literary magazine *Meanjin*, in which he proudly claims: "I do not feel that ethnic writing needs to answer for itself" (96). He sees "the ultimate aim of *Outrider* in the self-destruction as a self-consciously multicultural publication". It should become so integrated into Australian culture as it is evolving that it ought to take its place in the centre of the literary scene. His appeal culminates perhaps in an all-too-optimistic vision of *Meanjin* and other established Australian literary journals coming "closer in content and expression to the multicultural purposes implicit in the publication of *Outrider.*" (98)

The editorial board owes Serge Liberman gratitude for his generous, courageous and challenging zeal. The following is a somewhat more realistic description of *Outrider*. It appeared 1994 in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*: "Outrider: A Journal of Multicultural Literature in Australia, published in Brisbane under the general editorship of Manfred Jurgensen, began publication in 1984. The journal, which aims to add another dimension to Australian culture by promoting the creative work if immigrant writers and artists and has frequently debated multicultural issues, includes poetry, short stories, essays and addresses, plays, criticism, bibliographies, reviews and art work. As well as drawing attention to the contribution 'immigrant writers' make to Australian literature, the journal seeks to emphasise the place of Australian literature within the context of world literature. Of the 400 authors published over the first eight years, approximately half were born outside Australia. *Outrider* was published twice a year until 1989 and became an annual magazine in 1990. See also Jurgensen, Manfred."

Sadly, the facts did not reflect Serge Liberman's optimistic vision. However, he himself was a highly successful writer and critic who enjoyed strong support throughout the ethnic community, including countless Jewish readers. His prose consisted mainly of short story collections. They won widespread recognition, among them several Alan Marshall Awards, the Ethnic Affairs Commission Award and the 1984 NSW Premier's Literary Award. Liberman's writing addressed itself mainly to "the battered and the redeemed" (1990), not merely the survivors of the Holocaust. One critic remarked on the depth and intensity of his prose that was "more characteristic of the European than the Australian tradition" (465). Serge Liberman edited or co-edited the *Melbourne Chronicle*, the *Australian Jewish News,* the *Australian Times*, *Menorah* and compiled a *Bibliography of Australian Judaica*. He was indeed a true Man of Letters in the European tradition.

Alex Skovron (1948 -) is a highly sophisticated poet born in Poland who settled in Sydney and Melbourne. His writing has attracted international praise. Skovron is a Jewish artist of cosmopolitan urbanity, insight and wit. Despite his migrant background he has kept distant from artistic ethnicity and cultural alienation. The title of Skovron's retrospective compilation of New and Selected Poems, *Towards the Equator* (2014), reflects the centrality of his direction and vision. Skovron's poetry has never been genetic in the 'ethnic' sense. The author never wrote as a fringe dweller. On the contrary: His work belongs to the mainstream of contemporary world literature. From time to time he speaks more specifically "of Australia" (78), but his natural audience is an educated cosmopolitan readership. His beautiful *Lines from the Horizon* describe his writing as a "weaving" of "private fantasies". Skovron practises "the art to inhabit the vernacular Australia from within". Its "dialect is the world" (79). He is an outstandingly precise poet, yet he completes his *Horizon*-sequence with the lines: "I begin to believe in time, the old swindler… I do and I don't, for I am speaking loosely." (83) His last words pay homage to the language of an ironic, mock-heroic, distrustful and self-deprecating Australian.

Skovron's poems live with gods, divine artists and battlers. "I know you / Wolfgang, you composed my books!" (97) he informs Mozart. The complexity of his writing never loses a haunting presence. The poet knows "times after the future" (234). His elective affinity to music helps. Like many other poems, "A Marriage" demonstrates how powerfully Skovron translates music into poetry. His lines to Schoenberg end: "the zodiac crumbles, the world is shrinking, sickens, will suffer, the world will ever be the same". (233) Among the most powerful 'Jewish' lines are words dedicated to reflections of guilt. In simple yet unforgettable language they read: "But in the night, if one dares to approach and enter the compound, and place a hand upon a wall and stare into the stone – at night the factory glows." (237) The strength of Skovron's intellectual irony is demonstrated in "Some Precepts of Postmodern Mourning". It summarises the vanity of human insights: "Though in the end it needn't be. Later, this in itself must / be acknowledged as most significant of all, / or at least put down to the quintessential irony of death." (256)

The scope of Skovron's themes is almost limitless. Its forms range from prose poems to free verse and compositions of intricate structure. One recurring subject is the reflection on time and history. The poet comes to accept the vanities, the horrors and absurdities of life. His work is not free from mourning, but as a survivor he endorses life with its injustices, complexities and glories. Like music, he finds an almost stoic comfort in the gift of genius. Alex Skovron made no attempt to overcome the limits of ethnic or multicultural writing: Thanks to the gift of poetry he succeeded in capturing profound insights of the human condition. His splendid writing quality has nothing to do with political, sociological or philosophical considerations. Skovron's speech is a matter of propensity, endowment and aptitude. He is quite simply one of the world's best contemporary poets writing in English.

Peter Skrzynecki (1945 -) invokes his Polish-Ukrainian descent in perspectives of immigrant experience, childhood and the loss of a native home. As an author he adopts the language and persona of a child recording the fate of his migrant parents. Throughout his writing career alienation remains one of the main themes of his poetry and occasional prose. Following the success of Manfred Jurgensen's collection *Ethnic Australia* (1981),

he edited an anthology of migrant writing under the title of *Joseph's Coat* (1985). His treatment of loss, separation and memory extends far beyond migration and becomes ever more personal. It includes grieving over marital alienation, family breakdown, his own ill health and other experiences of the human condition. His adoption of a childhood perspective lends his writing a characteristic tone of vulnerability, loneliness and rejection. His poems are characterised by delicacy of observation. Skrzynecki has worked as a teacher. Not surprisingly, his writing frequently gives the impression of addressing itself to a sensitive youthful readership. Two of his poetry collections bear programmatic titles: *Immigrant Chronicle* and *The Polish Immigrant*. Nonetheless, describing Skrzynecki's work as 'multicultural' seems problematic, if only because its draws a line of separation between different generations of immigrants. His poetry is in that sense single-minded. It bears witness to others. To him Europe remains the 'old' country, the home of patriarchal origin. On a personal level his treatment of migration is extensive. The migrant child Skrzynecki discovers many kinds of unsettled, transient and peripatetic lives. He included one of his own poems in the anthology *Joseph's Coat*. 'Migrant Centre Site' invokes an abandoned camp where he and his family lived on first coming to Australia. He remembers and laments: "Except for what memory recalls / there is nothing to commemorate our arrival – / no plaques, no names carved on trees…" (151).

Banumbir Wongar [Sreten Božić] (1932 -   ) is the Aboriginal name of a Yugoslav/Serbian-born author who entered a tribal marriage and experienced Australian Aboriginal culture first-hand. His writing attracted world-wide attention and praise from writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Alan Paton, Thomas Keneally, Alan Marshall and Nadine Gordimer. His work presents the most radical transformation and adaptation from one indigenous civilisation to another, not only in the context of multiculturalism. After transformation to a different native culture displacement, exile and hopelessness remain. They transcend historical and racial boundaries. The real force of Wongar's writing in a style of Aboriginal approximation derives from the author's preference of the poetic over other kinds of articulation. Streten Božić soon discovered the inherent poetry of Aborignal faith and logic. Thanks to his sensitivity and cultural responsiveness he succeeded integrating it into a poetry almost his own. Ironically, much of his powerful wit also reveals the author's European background. The following lines are taken from a 'role-Aboriginal' poem transformed without alteration into Euro/Australian poetry. It is entitled 'The Forest' and appeared in his collection *Bilma* (1984): "When pillaged the country cries – a bee caught in a spider's web – no soul likes to be eaten silently". Another curiously Aboriginal/European metamorphosis presents the disturbing projection of a continuing industrial rape of the land: "All horizons are made of steel – you will curl into grief". A prosaic statement like "In ashes we are all identical" (238) evokes even more painful memories of European history.

To include the language of one culture in another discovers a profound but unknown shared sensitivity. The strength of Wongar's words derives from his grief over a culture all but destroyed by immigrant Australians. As a white European, Božić/Wongar laments the destruction of Aboriginal civilisation in much the same way as the annihilation of Indigenous tribal cultures. His poems read like a warning for White Australians struggling

against the pollution of the land, including the threat of complete nuclear annihilation. Reading Wongar reminds us there is no propaganda stronger than beauty.

Lamenting the excavation, uprooting and destruction of the earth, the fear of dust lies over all of Wongar's writing: "Grains of sand stay on lookout. You might be ground into dust." The late Professor Elizabeth Perkins argued: "Wongar's poems often resemble Anglo-Saxon verse with the laconic simplicity and allusive irony." It is this similarity that became the hall-mark of "his honest contemporaneity of style, compared with which the Aboriginal names affect the reader as a play of wit rather than an emotional evocation" (239). Yet for all that, Wongar's writing still raises the problem of a false sensibility: Some (white and Aboriginal) readers interpreted his posing as an Aborigine by birth as another form of Colonial usurpation. Yet, despite such doubts and reservations, Wongar's poems do stand on their own aesthetic merit. Indeed, it would be a gross disservice to both Banumbir Wongar and authentic Aboriginal culture to classify his work as 'multicultural'. His writing is rather a spectacular reminder of what Goethe called a *Wahlverwandtschaft*, ('elective affinity'). The consequence of a 'white Australian adopting an Aboriginal identity' need not be a critical challenge to either culture, but an encouragement for both to enter a meaningful, mutually beneficial dialogue. Nowadays children of inter-racial origin identifying themselves as Indigenous have done just that: Their own contribution to Australian literature has changed the nature of multiple cultural relations within contemporary writing. The list of Indigenous Australian writers is long and distinguished. The pride of so-called assimilated first- or second-generation 'interracial' authors promises a continuation of a dialogue that could perhaps at some stage be legitimately called multicultural.

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As can be seen, the differences between these Australian writers are significant. The only themes they appear to have in common are travel, walkabout, migration and transformation. Thanks to the "Tyranny of Distance", Australians still are among the most widely travelled people on earth. It could be said there is at least some similarity between touring long distances, going "walkabout" on tribal land or migrating from one country to another. Even at home most Australians are frequently "on the move", changing addresses throughout their lives. Perhaps the vast continent called for a transient settlement. 1994 saw the publication of *Changing Places. Australian Writers in Europe*. It featured 67 authors recording different travel experiences. The volume was received as a 'counter-anthology' reflecting a reversal of coming to Australia. It would be misleading to apply the concept of 'multiculturalism' to such writing. Instead, critics and readers treated *Changing Places* as a kind of literary migration.

There is of course no denying the sensitising influence of getting to know other countries and peoples, but the prospect of permanent settlement in a different place and culture is another challenge altogether. The term 'multicultural' has remained a bureaucratic and political misnomer introduced by politicians, academics and the media. Few authors or literary movements were subjected to such dubious concept. One leading critic of

multicultural literature, Sneja Gunew, pleads in her writing for "specificity" of subjects, themes, themes-within-themes ("feminist migration") and other particularities. It is this lack of exact and explicit terminology that dampened my own enthusiasm a quarter of a century ago. In applying the term 'multicultural', Australian politicians attempted to project social harmony within a migrant society. It soon became both criticised and idealised. The hope to counter developments of cultural ghettos did not always succeed. Meanwhile the term 'multicultural' has long gone global. In the United States and Europe nationalism and multiculturalism have become disturbing bedfellows.

Language remains the challenge of bilingual migrant writers. Acquiring the skill to transform a native speech into a foreign tongue is still grossly underrated. Histories of literature show it could be done, but such skills remain the exception (Joseph Conrad, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky, André Brink, Jack Kerouac, Milan Kundera etc.). Similar, equally unusual instances exist in other arts. Ludwig van Beethoven was in his late twenties when he lost his hearing. 'Overcoming' the challenge of the medium by finding a way to realise it in a different way is both an inherent contradiction and the ultimate artistic triumph. Banumbir Wongar and Walter Adamson managed to side-step this dilemma in their own way. But there is a limit how often it can be repeated in traditional artistic genres. Apart from the works of Adamson and Wongar, most other multicultural writing retains degrees of limitations in the structural scope and artistic quality of the work. In his study of "post-colonial collages" Paul Carter offers specific socio-linguistic reading approaches for such 'imperfect' works of 'migrant literature'.

Subscriptions to *Outrider* proved few migrants were committed readers of migrant literature. When *Outrider* eventually changed into anthologies of international literature, support from migrant readers barely remained the same. The assumption that migrants would read a journal of multicultural literature to share the experiences of migration with other newcomers did not eventuate. Generally, the government's intended encouragement of positive discrimination in the Republic of Letters failed. Literary multiculturalism merely encouraged a few individual writers. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* featured *Outrider,* but there was no entry under 'Multiculturalism'. It was not treated as a movement comparable to (say) the 'Jindyworobaks' whose aim was a revival of nationalism in Australia during the 1930s. Despite a few critical publications dealing with 'multicultural literature', there was little national acknowledgment of 'migrant writing'. Some of these publications were K. Gelder, P. Salzman (eds.), *The New Diversity. Australian Fiction 1970 – 88,* Melbourne 1989*;* D. Goodman, D. J. O'Hearn, C. Wallace-Crabbe (eds.), *Multicultural Australia. The Challenges of Change,* Newham 1991; S. Gunew, K. O Longley (eds.), *Striking Chords. Multicultural Literary Interpretations*, North Sydney 1992 and J. Docker, G. Fischer (eds.), *Adventures of Identity,* Tübingen 2001.

Nevertheless, the actual communication of migrant language (or 'language to migrants') remains a complex and fascinating process. In the final chapter of Paul Carter's classic *Living in a New Country* the sociolinguist claims that migrating not only marked "a new kind of history". He believes that "in the end it means refining a new, distinctively migrant poetics" (blurb). Admittedly, he offers only a theoretical projection that to date has not

yet been put to the test. However, if there is a sociolinguistic approach opening the path to a more meaningful evaluation of literary multiculturalism, it is Carter's uniquely original reading of what he calls a "post-colonial collage" (186-198). His theoretical analysis deals specifically with Australia's ethnic society, albeit without literary application. Even so, two of his works should become compulsory reading for every literary and linguistic scholar researching "history, travelling, language" and "the migrant aesthetic". Carter's *Living in a New Country* (1992) and *The Lie of the Land* (1996) promise to put an end to superficial readings of the 'multicultural'. Their only weaknesses would seem to be the term's ready-made socio-political genesis, implying simplified conclusions of a complicated literary and linguistic phenomenon. Carter claims authors and readers of migrant literature need to recognise "the artefactual nature of our reality and the possibility of reconsidering it" (198). Despite its complexity, his essay "Post-Colonial Collage: Aspects of a Migrant Aesthetics" (186) is by far the most insightful discussion of ethnic, migrant or multicultural writing. Its subtle but radical insights also point the way to a more meaningful and convincing understanding of '*literary multiculturalism*'. As he says: "Identity is a function of place, language and tradition", "place is arrived at by way of dialogue" and "we all are migrants even if we stay in the country of our birth". (synopsis)

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Bio Note: Manfred Jurgensen (Dr.phil., D.Litt., Ph.D.) is an Australian novelist, poet and critic who holds a Personal Chair at the University of Queensland (Brisbane) where he served as Professor of German Studies for almost 30 years. In recognition of his extensive international research and publication he received the degree of Doctor of Letters. Although he lived most of his life in Melbourne and Brisbane, he considers himself a European expatriate with Australian citizenship.

During 1980 to 2000 Jurgensen became the most influential figure in the emergence of literary multiculturalism in Australia. He founded Phoenix Publication in 1981 and became editor of *Outrider* from 1984 to 1995. Jurgensen won multiple literary prizes and holds many academic distinctions. In 1997 he was awarded the Order of Australia and Germany's Federal Cross of Merit, First Class. He is an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow who held Visiting Professorships at various international universities.

His academic publications include 16 books, 15 anthologies and over 100 critical essays in several languages. His literary work includes 14 novels in English, 8 in German. His most recent release includes the novels *Deutschland einst und dereinst*, and *Fausts Erbe.*

He is currently completing a major study on the great Marxist critic Hans Mayer. Manfred Jurgensen is the author of 16 collections of verse, in English and in German. His best-known poetry volumes are *The Otherness of Words* (2013) and *The River* (2016).